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Hitting the Re-START Button

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At their meeting at the Group of Eight summit in Northern Ireland and in a speech in Berlin in June, U.S. President Barack Obama suggested to President Vladimir Putin that the U.S. and Russia should reduce their nuclear arsenals by one-third from the ceilings set by the 2010 New START agreement and achieve "bold reductions in U.S. and Russian tactical weapons in Europe."

Further reciprocal cuts in the two nations' still-bloated Cold War nuclear stockpiles are in order. Three years since New START was completed, each country possesses more than enough nuclear firepower to deter any Russian or U.S. nuclear adversary. Today, the chance of a bolt-from-the-blue nuclear attack is near zero, but it is certain that a counter-strike involving 100 or so nuclear weapons would kill tens of millions almost instantly and more in the following weeks and months.

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So far, however, Putin and other senior officials have responded coolly to Obama's proposals, offering a long list of preconditions and concerns. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Rybakov said Moscow would "carefully" analyze the U.S. proposal on the basis of at least several factors that affect the balance of deterrence.

Adjustments to nuclear and military postures certainly require careful consideration, but it is already clear that maintaining the status quo is not in the strategic interests of Moscow or Washington.

Russian officials say they want further U.S.-Russian reductions to be "reviewed in a multilateral format" because, as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told Rossia television, reductions beyond New START will make nuclear arsenals of the U.S. and Russia comparable to those of other countries with nuclear weapons.

This is an overstatement. Today, the U.S. and Russia possess more than 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons and have far more capable delivery systems than their potential adversaries. Russia currently has 1,480 deployed warheads on some 492 strategic launchers, while the U.S. has 1,654 deployed warheads on 792 strategic launchers. New START allows each side to deploy 1,550 nuclear warheads on 700 strategic missiles, submarines and bombers until the year 2021. Each side has thousands more tactical nuclear weapons and strategic warheads in reserve.

By comparison, China has 50-75 warheads on its land-based, long-range ballistic missiles and a total arsenal of some 240 nuclear weapons. France deploys less than 300 strategic nuclear weapons and Britain less than 160. India, Pakistan and Israel each have around 100 nuclear weapons, on short- and medium-range delivery systems.

Russia's strategic warhead and delivery system deployments are already below the New START ceilings, and Russia is spending heavily to build new strategic missiles to keep pace with the U.S. Meanwhile, the U.S. retains a significantly greater capacity to upload stored warheads on its larger missile and bomber force.

A one-third reduction in both the U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals would ensure that both countries have roughly equivalent strategic arsenals and would help reduce the enormous financial costs of planned strategic force modernization by both countries. Without another round of negotiated reductions, Russia will be hard pressed to maintain numerical parity with the U.S. in the coming years.

Reductions to 1,000 or fewer Russian and U.S. deployed strategic warheads would still give both countries a huge numerical advantage over other nuclear-armed nations but would also

put serious pressure on China and the others to cap their nuclear programs and contribute to the nuclear disarmament process.

Russia continues to insist that further offensive nuclear reductions also depend on a resolution to its concerns about future U.S. strategic missile defense plans. This is reasonable, of course, but Russia must be more realistic about U.S. missile defense capabilities, which are far more limited than some Russian military planners fear.

With the Pentagon's recent decision to terminate its Phase Four missile interceptor program in Europe, there is no U.S. missile interceptor capability in place or under development that is capable of downing Russia's advanced strategic missiles. U.S. ground-based strategic interceptors in Alaska and California are limited in number —currently 30 and potentially 44 by 2017— and are not capable of defeating Russia's ballistic missiles equipped with decoys and other countermeasures.

Due to technical constraints, U.S. strategic missile defenses will only have a limited capability against a small number of unsophisticated, long-range missiles, which Iran or North Korea might eventually build in the future.

In April, Obama proposed a legally binding Russian-U.S. agreement for the regular exchange of information on missile defense programs, which could help Russia verify U.S. claims about its limited missile defense capabilities. Such an agreement, accompanied by a joint presidential statement reaffirming that the two countries' missile interceptor programs do not threaten each other's security, could go a long way toward addressing Russia's concerns — at least for the next 15 years.

Ryabkov and other Russian officials have also expressed concern about U.S. high-precision, conventional strategic weapons systems. The best way to address this issue is through a new round of strategic arms reduction talks that limit U.S. and Russian strategic missile and bomber systems, whether they carry nuclear or conventional payloads.

For many years, Russian officials have said they won't consider limits on their stockpile of some 2,000 tactical nuclear weapons until the remaining 180 U.S. tactical nuclear bombs stored in bunkers in five European NATO countries are removed and their storage sites dismantled. For its part, the U.S. and NATO have said they are "prepared to consider further reducing its requirement for nonstrategic nuclear weapons assigned to the alliance in the context of reciprocal steps by Russia."

Fresh thinking and bolder action is required on both sides. This is not the 1970s or 1980s, when NATO might have considered using nuclear weapons to halt a Soviet land invasion or vice versa. Nor is it plausible that modern Russia might need tactical nuclear weapons to defend the homeland from a military threat from its Asian partners China or India.

About half of Russia's tactical nuclear warheads are assigned to obsolete air-defense and naval systems and can be eliminated. Russia can also easily provide verifiable assurances that its remaining tactical warheads are in central locations away from its western border. Meanwhile, the U.S. could begin the process of removing its tactical bombs from Europe. Such steps would reduce the salience of battlefield nuclear weapons worldwide and improve prospects in other areas of European security and arms control.

Although each country faces unique security challenges, the massive nuclear arsenals that Russia and the U.S. have inherited from the Cold War are poorly suited for today's threats, including terrorism, cyberattack and proliferation prevention.

By working with the U.S. on further strategic nuclear reductions, sensible limits on tactical nuclear weapons and new arrangements on missile defense, Russia can maintain strategic stability. In addition, both countries can meet their nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty commitments on disarmament and can put pressure on other nuclear-armed states to exercise restraint. Putin and Obama should direct their diplomats to work out a framework agreement in time for the scheduled U.S.-Russian summit in Moscow Sept. 3-4, ahead of the G20 summit in St. Petersburg on Sept. 5-6.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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